

The Impossibility of Generalizing “The Refugee Experience”

Asma and Taylor

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As a former refugee, Asma experienced many of the same processes and struggles that come with arriving in a foreign country as an asylum-seeker. She mentioned "culture shock" a few times in our conversations, and her descriptions of the difficulty of those initial months in the United States echoed testimonies and research by other anthropologists about refugee experiences:

A: *I mean, not in shock, like the culture, and everything, I see everything's beautiful, I'm blessed to be here in America.*

T: Yeah.

A: *But how to handle, how to handle—you alone. No friend, no sister, no father, n-no one else, no one else...*

T: Yeah.

A: *They helped me a lot. They-they-they put me house, they had a house for me, apartment. They give me money, three hundred dollars?*

T: Yeah.

A: *For whole month, but when someone take you—Now, I take you and I put you Somalia, and I say, um, "Six months, maybe eight months, you will be here, you need to learn the language, you need to learn the culture, you need to... After seven months, after eight months, the last month I will give you benefit, it will be the eighth month."*

[fade]

A: *Learn another language, it need time a little bit.*

T: Yeah?

A: *You cannot learn, one months, two months, everything.*

T: No.

A: *Is a life lesson, so after that process to learn the culture, to learn the language, to get job without a car, you don't have a car...*

Connor and colleagues, as well as a few other resources I found, listed four central changes that Somalis and other refugees struggle to get used to: cultural differences, a new language, driving, and the weather (2016: 12). Asma described all of these things in detail, but the added pressure to find a job and make money in order to support herself was another chief concern.

The *time* is also crucial to Asma's experience. The refugee office supported her for eight months, and then she was utterly on her own. The English classes she took, the stipend, and the health insurance were helpful, but Asma clearly experienced stress as she tried make a life for herself as quickly as possible.

beautiful
is my
verant
word.
I see
every day
beautiful
Sometime
the word
is said
but I
don't
thing
about.

yes
was
not
easy

Having a community to support her was key, then. Moving to Kentucky brought instant connections to affordable housing, rides to work, and community members who were willing to help her in her transition into life on her own.

As I've discussed before, Asma also found empowerment in her ability to make decisions for herself as a woman, seeking her own employment, education, and romantic connections.

However, while there are similarities between Asma's experiences and those of other refugees and migrants moving to the United States, Liisa Malkki and Svenberg and colleagues make a crucial point in attempting to dismantle universalizing and victimizing generalizations about what many people term "the refugee experience."

Malkki summarizes Keller's series of "stages" in "the refugee experience" that move from "perception of threat" to "adjustment and acculturation; and, finally, residual states and changes in behavior caused by the experiences" (1995: 508). However, she criticizes this need to organize and generalize this experience, particularly in the stresses and traumas that come from fleeing one's country and moving to a new one:

Thus, although many refugees have survived violence and loss that are literally beyond the imagination of most people, we mustn't assume that refugee status in and of itself constitutes a recognizable, generalizable psychological condition. (510)

Malkki's critiques speak to the dangers of universalizing that experience, and Asma's story is a strong example which supports her claims. Asma lost her father in a violent explosion, and she spent her entire childhood moving around, internally displaced by the violence in Mogadishu. The fear of violence was pervasive: "you're not safe, but you live," she told me in one of our conversations, and while that statement made logical sense, I don't know if I will ever truly be able to understand just how difficult that experience must have been, to continue to live life amidst the constant fear of sexual and physical violence.

losing
my father
was very
painful

Later in the same article, Malkki writes:

In many works of refugee studies, there is an implicit assumption that in becoming "torn loose" from their cultures, "uprooted" from their homes, refugees suffer the loss of all contact to the lifeworlds they fled. It is as if the place left behind were no longer peopled. (515)

never
forgot

Asma was not "torn loose" from Somalia, and "the place left behind" is still "peopled." She sends money home to support her mother and sister, and she talks on the phone with her family as often as she can. Consequently, our images of the typical refugee's experience are flawed.

family
is the
first

Finally, Svenberg, Battsson, and Skott write about a need to reiterate the resilience of refugee populations and their connections to their homeland:

Even so, the Somalis interviewed did not accept the role of victims but were actively responsive to their situation. To the informants their Somali identity seemed self-evident and there seems to be a stability of ethnic identification within the Somali group. (2010: 286)

The Swedish-Somalian refugees they interviewed do not fit the typical image of a "certain kind of helplessness," to quote Malkki again, but exemplify their agency and confidence in their identities after fleeing Somalia (1996: 388). Asma, too, shows remarkable strength and resilience throughout her story. There were moments when she was helpless and hopeless, but Asma never gave up. She sought employment and knowledge and spent time taking care of her roommates' children and dated and cultivated her faith... Asma did not simply sit and wait for her life to change for the better. She *lived* her life and actively pursued a path towards safety and empowerment.

That is what Asma and I wanted to share when we were discussing how she wanted to tell her story. The point was that she lived a life, and that being a refugee did not mean following those prescribed stages with meek helplessness, but existing in a complex, multi-layered lifeworld that extended beyond the mere experience of statelessness. Asma lived a life. She herself admits that she was lucky to have had the experience she did, and I want to make clear that her story does *not* disprove the existence of other ways a refugee lives and moves about the world. But it *does* help destabilize the dehumanizing stereotypes of "the refugee experience" by sharing a complex, detailed narrative that both includes many of the processes refugees go through and extends beyond the processes enacted on Asma and into the actions she took throughout those years.

Love it